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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000875

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SUBJECT: ZIA PLEADS FOR SONS

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia Butenis, reason para 1.4 d.

11. (C) Summary. Khaleda Zia urged the Ambassador to support her embattled sons Tarique and Koko, asserted she was ready to leave Bangladesh but the government failed to get her a Saudi visa, said she has no contact with the military, and is mystified by the military's actions and objectives. Local media derided Zia's statement at a post-meeting press conference that her party abjures dynastic politics. End Summary.

12. (C) On May 25 in a small function room at the Sheraton Hotel. the Ambassador paid her farewell call on Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia. Accompanied by poloff (notetaker), she met privately with Zia and Zubaida Rahman, wife of son Tarique, before engaging in a broader political conversation that included a dozen, largely unknown, party functionaries. Estranged Secretary General Mannan Bhuiyan, the leading contender to replace Zia, was a last-minute addition to the expanded setting. He nodded solemnly when Zia made her points, even when she contradicted what he had told us in a separate meeting the day before (e.g., why he thought lifting the political party ban would be a mistake).

13. (C) Zia, noticeably thinner but still elegantly coifed and attired in a lace sari, turned to her daughter-in-law to plead Tarique's case and appeal for U.S. and international support. An articulate pediatrician who normally says little at social functions, Zubaida argued passionately that her husband is being falsely charged and abused out of envy over his mass popularity and his unwavering commitment to national service. Handing over copies of medical reports dating back to 2003, she said Tarique should be given bail on medical grounds and should be shifted out of the general jail population to the special quarters reserved (by law) for social elites. (Note: According to post RMO's review of the reports Tarique has tested negatively several times for hepatitis B, has a sore neck for which he has a prescription, and may have glaucoma.)

14. (C) Zubaida stated that Tarique is allowed only one 20-minute visit per month, and that his lawyer has been denied access to his case files. She and Zia stoutly denied that anyone in the family has overseas money or property, with Zia adding, "Blame the corrupt but my family is not corrupt." Zia claimed to be surprised by the military's actions against Koko, who is "very sick," and Tarique. We are from the "same family," she remarked, but they don't talk to me. "Tell me, what do they want? Why are they against me?"

15. (C) The Ambassador expressed sympathy for their suffering, but told them that the international community lacks the influence to intervene on individual cases. She noted that

when relatives of detainees from both parties seek our support, we reply that we are in no position to determine guilt or innocence but that we do urge the government to accord due process to all detainees and to treat them humanely.

¶16. (C) Zia acknowledged pressure on her to leave Bangladesh, and stated she was ready to depart if both sons were allowed to accompany her. However, the arrangement unraveled, she said, when the government failed to secure for her a Saudi visa, even after the Saudi Charge visited her at home to ascertain her travel interest. Asked if traveling abroad meant exile, Zia replied, "Government will provide everything?"

¶17. (C) Zia asked the Ambassador to plead her case with the government and the military. Her land line at home has been turned off, although she still has her mobile phone, and while there are no restrictions on her movements, some people have been stopped from visiting her at home on the cantonment. Zia indicated that while earlier she had been prepared to travel on the assurance that Tarique would follow shortly, now she wants the family to travel together.

¶18. (C) Turning to other matters, Zia affirmed support for political party reform after the ban on political party activity is lifted, blamed the government for rising rates of inflation, unemployment, and crime, and alleged that a previously-free judiciary has been subverted by the government into a partisan political tool.

¶19. (C) In response to the Ambassador's query, Zia insisted she has no regrets over how she handled the run-up to the aborted elections. She claimed her party regretted the Awami League's unjustified decision to boycott but had planned to

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hold new elections several months later, a scenario the Ambassador observed many Bangladeshis would find hard to fathom.

¶10. Comment: Zia appeared befuddled by what she sees as a shocking personal betrayal by her "military family." Her priority is clearly on saving her sons, but she was cagey on whether she is ready for political retirement. Ironically, she and her bitter foe, Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League, agree that elections should be held soon, the political activity ban should be lifted as a prelude to implementing political party reforms, the government is mismanaging the economy, and the anti-corruption campaign is politically motivated; yet, there is no interest in either party for making common cause against the government.

¶11. (C) Zia's meeting with the Ambassador was big news locally, with some accounts stating it was Zia's first public outing since the State of Emergency. Unfortunately for Zia, the opportunity to reaffirm forcefully her political agenda was drowned out by media derision of her comment at a post-meeting press conference that the BNP abjures dynastic politics.

BUTENIS